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ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE  
AND BELIEF AS TO THE IMMORTALITY OF THE  
SOUL.

BY W. LUTOSLAWSKI.

There is one thing in which almost all religions agree : this one common hope of all believers is the immortality of the soul. It should be better named the continuance of the individual after the death of the body, because immortality is a negative idea, which does not include the indefinite continuation of existence. Death is known to us only by the observation of bodies, and therefore the assertion of the immortality of the soul is a truism. We see only *bodies* dying, and so it is superfluous to assert that the soul is immortal. But usually by immortality is meant more than the negation of death. The general acceptance of this word includes not only absence of death, but also continuation of full and conscious existence, and I shall use the word immortality in this positive sense. But still the positive sense of immortality varies according to individual belief. Many believers consider themselves as accepting immortality while supposing that after death they will be quite indifferent to everything which interested them in the earthly life, and that they will be changed in every respect to such a degree that the question arises, Why should they then be held for the same persons that they now are? According to the different conceptions of the state of the soul after death, the word immortality has a very different meaning in different churches, though all the religions of earth agree that man does not cease to exist when he dies.

Not only the religions agree in recognizing this truth, but also most of the eminent philosophers from Plato down to Kant accept it as an important part of their teaching.

Now, there is a very strange contrast between the general religious and philosophical acceptance of the immortality of the soul and the quite as general practical contempt for the consequences of this belief. I dare say that the large majority of religious people of all denominations in the world *do not* have a perfect certainty of their existence after death. It seems strange at first, and may be combatted by many ministers of the

Church, but it is a fact that requires a psychological explanation and deserves the attention of all religious people. It is interesting to find out what kind of efforts will produce more harmony between the theoretical religious teaching and practical life.

My assertion of the fact of a general indifference or want of certainty about the immortality of the soul is based upon the observation that among all the divergencies of opinions between men no difference can be greater and more pronounced than the difference between a man who has an absolute and undeniable knowledge that he cannot cease to exist, and a man who either has no sure conviction about this matter or who openly denies the existence of man after death. The first will look at life on the earth as only a very small part of existence, and will endure the trial of this life as a training for a more perfect state. He will not be afraid to die, nor will he think that death or physical misery is a great evil. He will do his duty with a calm, fixed mind, and will find the true aim of life in the moral perfection of the individual, not in the material prosperity of the community. The individual will seem to him more important than the city, the State, the Church. All communities are to him only abstract ideas, while only the living soul is an eternal reality. He may be taxed with egotism by his countrymen because he is without political ambition, indifferent to social distinctions, a foe to all external show, to titles and honors—only interested in the moral perfection and progress of himself and his friends. He looks to death as to a happy event; but he would not shorten his days because he believes the duties and labors of this life make him better prepared to enjoy the work of a future life.

Of quite another character is the man who denies the continuation of his existence after death. He finds in the earthly life the only scope for all his actions. He works here only to obtain and enjoy immediate results of his labor. He dreads to think of death because his thought of it as the greatest evil deprives him of his activity and spoils his enjoyment of life. He may love mankind, but if he works for mankind he seeks above all to create better material conditions of life, to perfect material existence, leaving moral perfection to the individual conscience and believing that the only source of crime is misery. He does his duty in the hope

of some reward. If he is of a noble mind, he will not strive for riches, but for recognition, honors, glory. He will not hesitate to endanger the life of the individual for what he considers the benefit of the community, because for him the individual has only an apparent and ephemeral existence, while the true enduring entities are the city, the state, and all social organizations. He identifies himself with these complex bodies and lends them his soul. He desires the gratitude of his countrymen and cherishes the idea of living on in their memory.

Of course I have taken the extreme types of two opposite tendencies. But if we look at mankind at large we find that, at least on the continent of Europe, the second type is far more frequent, and not only among the positivists, who frankly profess with Madame Ackermann—

Eternité de l'homme, illusion, chimère,  
 Mensonge de l'amour et de l'orgueil humain,  
 Il n'a point eu d'hier ce phantôme éphémère  
 Il lui faut un demain !  
 Elle se dissoudra, cette argile légère  
 Qu'ont émue un instant la joie et la douleur.  
 Les vents vont disperser cette noble poussière  
 Qui fut jadis un cœur !

I have seen also devout people, attending church, abstaining from meat on Friday, confessing monthly their sins to the priest, and affirming their belief in the future life, who nevertheless act in every particular as if this life were the only life they had to live. If we look at their constant craving for material advantages without any regard to their training for another life, we must admit that they do not believe that every act of this life has an eternal influence on the future life.

I find only one explanation of this divergence between the religious teaching and the practical life of the majority of mankind. I find it only in the psychological difference between a *hope* and a *certainty*, between *belief* and *knowledge*. Every religion, so far as it is based on revelation, on the testimony of witnesses, cannot afford to give to the masses more than a mere hope of immortality. I have often heard immortality spoken of as a promise of God to mankind. Granting this, it is easy to understand why

this hope does not rule the actions of practical life. It is because in practical life we have almost at every step a certain *knowledge* of the immediate consequences of our actions. If this *knowledge* shows us that a certain action leads *immediately* to a certain pleasure, then the mere *hope* or *fear* of a responsibility after death cannot overcome this immediate *knowledge*, and men act in conformity with their knowledge of the nearest consequences, without caring about what may occur after death.

A *hope* or a *belief* has not such an influence over the actions of men as *exact knowledge*. This explains the fact that men do not act in conformity with the belief in their eternal existence. They have no strong conviction upon the subject, only a changing hope, or a belief founded on authorities.

The only way to bring more conformity between human life and religious teaching is to change this *hope* or *weak belief* into a *strong conviction* based on *exact knowledge*. One of the greatest thinkers of modern ages, *Kant*, denied the possibility of a perfectly scientific proof of the immortality of the soul. But if I look at the development of philosophy after *Kant*, I must affirm that such a *scientific proof* of man's permanent existence *can be given*, and that the statement of this truth *surpasses in certainty and evidence the truths of all other sciences*. It will not be exaggeration to say that we have no better logical foundation for believing that to-morrow the sun will rise than for affirming that millions of years hence we shall still remain the same persons and be able to remember our limited experience of to-day. In other words, the law of gravitation cannot claim to be better proved than the law of infinite and permanent existence of every single human being.

To give the full proof of it would require a long dialectical discussion, but it is easy to show in a few words what seems to be the only right way of obtaining a scientific proof of this most important truth.

We must start from the logical investigation into the conditions of obtaining truth. In the theory of human knowledge we find the basis for a true metaphysics. It is unthinkable, that nothing exists, and if anything among the many existing phenomena has real existence, then this true being cannot cease to exist, because if it could decay it would not be true being. Now,

among all things which seem to exist there is only one of which we know certainly that it does exist. That one certainly existing thing, as Descartes stated, is *ourselves*. The external material world cannot be of a more certain existence than ourselves, because, as physiological and psychological inquiry shows, every external quality depends entirely upon our own conception. Our eye is the source of colors, our ear the source of sounds. And by closer investigation we find that the eye and the ear are also external to ourselves and do not form any essential part of our person. I can lose my eyes and my ears and almost every part of my body and still remain always the same entire person. Therefore I have a right to claim that I am a really existing being, more than any part of the material world around me.

The idealistic school of philosophy, while acknowledging this fact, still asserted that there is something else which has a more certain existence than the human person—the universal ideas which enforce themselves upon all minds in the same way. But even this view cannot be accepted by a psychologist. The ideas have no existence out of our own minds. They are existing only in our soul, and their existence emphasizes only our own existence.

If neither bodies nor universal ideas have an independent existence, there is nothing left to be a true being save persons like ourselves. Only such persons—and I mean by person only the soul, not the body—have the privilege of knowing that they do exist. Then, if spiritual existence is the only true existence known to me, and I am the only thing that has indubitable existence, this existence can never cease and must continue eternally, if anything exists. But I cannot imagine a time in which there is nothing, and so I must continue to exist for all time and must have existed always in some way.

The above reasoning, if filled out with the detailed arguments given by special inquiry, is quite as sound and strong as any other reasoning in science—nay, it is the strongest argument proving the most certain truth. Only by such philosophical reasoning do we come to a true *knowledge* of immortality—far above all *hopes* and *beliefs*.

If I am right, the only way to bring more harmony between human actions and the teachings of religion is to associate re-

ligion with philosophy and undertake to prove, without any other authority than reason, what is assumed or believed on various historical authorities.

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